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### **Session Watch: Vouchers alive in Texas Senate, less so in Texas House**

**By Senator Carlos Uresti**

In the past decade of the Texas Legislature, very few issues are as contentious as Vouchers. While they go by many names, such as tax credit scholarships and education savings accounts, to the average person a voucher is any route to use public dollars for a private school education.

In the Senate, the voucher bill is assigned the number Senate Bill 3. If a Senate Bill is numbered one through twenty, it means the Lieutenant Governor believes the issue is a priority. Being a priority bill and having a price tag of \$330 Million ensures that the committee hearing would go into the night, and it did not disappoint. A substitute bill with a seemingly lower price tag was finally voted out two days after the initial hearing, and the bill will come before the full Senate most likely by Thursday, March 30th.

There were hours of testimony and comments from legislators and interested citizens. We heard from teachers, students, clergy, bloggers, professors, registered lobbyists and so-called think tanks. Comments ranged from the insistence that vouchers will save our education system, to the suggestion that Texas could not stop tax dollars from going to private religious schools with radical anti-American teachings.

I voted against Senate Bill 3 because I believe that our current public education system is at a point where we cannot remove even one dollar, let alone hundreds of millions of them. I also represent large areas of West Texas where the school district is the center of the community, and there are no other options.

A voucher option won't increase options in most rural communities, but it will impact the amount of money that is available to the Legislature to fund their schools. Further, I also heard from many students and parents who home-school, or attend private schools who voiced concerns that the flow of public money, would be followed shortly by government accountability and regulation of their school, and they would rather private school remain just that, private.

We won't know for a few weeks how the bill will fair in the Texas House, but if you believe public statements in the media from House leadership, the road will be far bumpier, or maybe even a dead end in the House. I encourage everyone to contact your representative in the Texas House so your voice can be heard.

This week is also one of importance in that the Senate will pass our version of the state budget over to the House. I voted for the budget in the Finance Committee, and on the Senate Floor, as did all of my Senate colleagues.

The budget we passed is all but complete, and I still have concerns about a number of items that were either not funded, or not funded accordingly with their importance to my Senate District. The budget is 873 pages in length, and I look forward to devoting more time in the near future to highlight both its benefits and shortcomings.

The important vote on the budget will take place on the final product that comes out of conference committee—the legislative term for negotiating the differences between the House and Senate budgets—most likely in late April. A vote for the budget now helps to move it along to the next step, and allows a member to continue to negotiate further for the priorities of their district. A vote against the budget at this early state would hamper a legislator's efforts to influence the final product.

I have voted against past budgets that I felt would devastate our child abuse prevention efforts and our public schools. What happens to this budget over the next month will determine whether I can support and defend it to those who elect me to represent them. In a tough budget year where available revenue is scarce, the expectation coming into session was that the budget would be lean—we must work hard to make sure the lean budget doesn't turn into a mean budget. Semper Fi!

*Session Watch is a bi-weekly column by State Senator Carlos Uresti to provide a first-hand account of the ongoing 85<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.*

*Sen. Uresti represents Senate District 19, which covers more than 35,000 square miles and contains all or part of 17 counties, two international ports of entry, eleven state parks, 51 school districts, 2700 miles of highways, and more than 23,000 producing oil and gas wells in both the Eagle Ford Shale and Permian Basin. The district is larger than 12 states and 82 Nations, and contains over one third of the Texas-Mexico border. Sen. Uresti is proud to serve on the Finance, Education, and Veteran Affairs & Border Security Committees and as Vice Chair of the Health & Human Services Committee.*